

## RECONFIGURING & RESHAPING WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) FOR EMPLOYABILITY BEYOND COVID

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### Abstract

Higher education institutions have become increasingly focused on the quality of teaching and learning, and the provision of high-quality educational experiences for students in various learning contexts. Well-designed and structured work-integrated learning is beneficial to the student, the academic institution, the employer and the community. Graduate employability is a complex concept, one which has expanded in recent years to encapsulate a diverse range of skills, attributes, and other measures including active citizenship. Continued improvement of methodologies in teaching and learning is key to the development of any society. It is therefore essential to governments for devising strategies to compete with the rising global competition in times of economic uncertainty. But progress cannot be created in a vacuum. It requires connected efforts, cross-border discussions and vigorous assessments. Thus it is important to highlight forward thinking and future-driven strategies for smooth transitioning from education to the labour market and identify factors impeding skills performance.

WIL is significant in exposing undergraduates to the required employability skills to function effectively in their chosen profession. This poses a challenge to higher education to design and deliver curriculums that meet these expectations. This paper discusses key points that include creating a culture that fosters partnerships between higher education and industry, designing curriculum which is responsive to the needs of both community and industry, as well as reviewing key graduate and labour market data to inform long term employability strategies. Covid-19 has impacted WIL, remote WIL experiences and the contribution that has been made to enhance employability outcomes for graduates now and post Covid.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum design, employability, skills development, partnership, work integrated learning.*

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### 1. Context: The Impact of COVID-19 and its Challenges

Our world of work is going through a rapid transformation. Globalization, demographic shifts and technological changes brought about the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) are having profound effects on the global labour market. Work-integrated learning (WIL) is considered a key strategy for promoting graduate employability. Graduate employability is a complex concept, one which has broadened in recent years to encapsulate a diverse range of skills, attributes, and other measures such as networks, professional-identity and active citizenship. One impact of the global pandemic of 2020 was a rapid shift in the delivery of work-integrated learning (WIL) to remote activity. Along with professional practice research in higher degrees, WIL practice, including placements and non-placements, responded actively and sometimes reactively to the challenges of sudden transition to online environments.

In the post-secondary education setting, work-integrated learning (WIL) is used to describe all kinds of practice-based learning integrated into the curriculum. Work-based learning (WBL) in a narrow sense, is used to refer to learning that takes place in the professional setting. It can refer to a broad range of learning experiences including; clinical placements, internships, work experience and is integral part of many practice-based degrees such as Engineering, Health, Education. The impact of the pandemic restricted the access to professional environments so students had less to no opportunities to experience work placements and at the same time lower university incomes and budgets meant restrictions in support which had further implications on equity and accessibility within these programs. The WBL types mostly affected by the pandemic were compulsory placements where students are fully immersed in a workplace setting (Zegwaard et al., 2020).

As society entered 2020 the changing trends of work was also a discussion that was being had on the periphery of much practice. Viloni et al (2020) reported that while ideas such as increases to remote working or greater reliance on digital communication had been spoken about, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic saw these trends accelerate at a pace never before seen. Recent interventions in

response to the COVID-19 emergency has seen an acceleration of the evolution of work with large segments of the workforce, previously not impacted by emergent and gradual change, being suddenly forced into new ways of working at a distance to colleagues and the workplace. Volini et al., argue that it has not been the inadequacy of technology that has previously prevented the long-awaited transformation of work, but the challenge of building models that integrate humans with technology. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of human connection, belonging, and creativity in the modern workplace. Drivers of innovation and creativity in how work is undertaken and structured, and how organizations remained connected, despite government enforced lock-downs, has revealed a raft of new ways of connecting and working. Technology is also changing the skills requirements of occupations, affecting both new entrants to the labour market and older workers. Unfortunately, current education systems are not adequately preparing the workforce for these changes, tending to fail both young and old. There is a disconnect both in terms of curriculums and requisite skills in occupations and between education outcomes and employers' needs.

Globally, many youths are unemployed or disengaged from the labour market. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 64 million youth are unemployed worldwide (ILO, 2019). More strikingly, 20 percent of young people are not in education, training or employment—they are disengaged. At the same time, millions of jobs remain unfilled. In part, this is brought about by youth not possessing relevant work experience, having underdeveloped or inadequate skills, and lacking career guidance. This paradox—high youth unemployment alongside widespread vacancies—requires rethinking the role that education systems, and specifically Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and other types of work-based learning, can play in bridging this divide.

Sadly, there is a residual view in most countries is that an academic track is the only pathway to a good career, while TVET—in both traditional occupations (i.e., construction and manufacturing) and emerging occupations (i.e., Information technology, hospitality, and management) remains stigmatized as inferior. Yet TVET graduates with the requisite knowledge and skills can command high salaries, particularly in advanced economies, a fact that is given insufficient emphasis when advising young people about their career possibilities (OECD, 2018a). One solution would be to create mechanisms and systems whereby highly skilled employees can contribute to the learning process, benefitting not only TVET institutions but also creating opportunities for TVET innovations. Such partnerships could represent two-way flows—from workplaces into educational settings and through joint working for knowledge and skills to flow back into workplaces. Such a two-way street could both help raise the standing of TVET systems and the quality of work-based learning. Given this confluence of challenges, the higher education sector could have an important role in examining pathways to employment and the role that TVET can play both for those entering workforce and older workers that need to reskill. TVET systems must increase their partnership with employers to ensure appropriate forms of learning and access to world-class skills to promote new and continuing employment suitable for a high-skill economy and newly emerging forms of employment.

## 2. Methodology

The desktop research took place under exceptional circumstances, where face-to-face interviews were not possible but where websites could be used to gather information and data for debate and discussion. The study adjusted to these new circumstances innovative investigating of various articles, institutional practices and responses to the pandemic. In doing so the was able to extract information on individual experiences.

On the Universities South Africa (USAF) website a document called *Guidelines for Universities to Follow Regarding Work Integrated Learning in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic* – is worth reading. A scan was done of the WIL environment at the 26 public universities in South Africa to determine the impact on students and universities involved with WIL. Responses were received from several universities of which 13 contained sufficient data to be used for analysis. This showed that just over 70 000 students were in programmes with a WIL component.

## 3. Theory

### 3.1 Kolbs – tenets of experiential learning theory

Experiential learning opportunities should be grounded in a theoretical framework to ensure that each opportunity is educational. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory was chosen as the framework for this guide. As identified by Thornton Moore (2010), most approaches to learning through experience share theoretical underpinnings drawn from early experiential learning philosophies. Kolb and Kolb

(2005) identify six core tenets upon which the experiential learning theory is founded [Adapted from Kolb (1984); Stirling (2013)].

- I. **Learning is a process.** • Promoting student acknowledgement of previous informal and formal learning.
- II. **Learning is grounded in experience.**
- III. **Learning involves mastery of all four learning modes.**  
Introducing student learning experiences at an appropriate pace and progression;  
Challenging students' preconceptions in light of new experience, theory and reflection and providing students with opportunities to experience, reflect, theorize and apply
- IV. **Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.**  
Addressing students' feelings, perceptions, thoughts and actual behaviours throughout the WIL experience
- V. **Learning occurs when an individual interacts with his or her environment.**  
Providing students with experience in the wider real-world environment (e.g., workplace context)
- VI. **Knowledge is created through learning.**  
Learning should be individualized to each student and assigning students responsibility over their own learning.

According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is often accompanied by personal development. From this perspective, the connection between learning and development occurs when an individual's personal qualities interact with the external environment and provide an opportunity for personal knowledge to collaborate with the cultural or social knowledge of this environment (Kolb, 1984). In the context of experiential learning theory, personal development relies on the degree of complexity an individual reaches within each learning mode, as well as an individual's abilities to integrate and effectively express all four learning modes (Kolb, 1984). As individuals develop through the learning process, they progress through the developmental phases of acquisition, specialization and integration.

#### 4. Conceptions of employability - literature review

The term employability is often used interchangeably with the notion of work-readiness. Yorke (2010) contends that work-readiness is a set of conditions sufficient for gaining initial employment, while employability is a set of skills which are necessary but not sufficient for gaining employment. Whatever term is used, it is better to holistically consider that a graduate needs to be both employable and work-ready to increase their chances of employment (Sachs, Rowe, & Wilson, 2017). Conceptions of employability have broadened in recent years, from a focus on mostly technical skills and attributes thought to be required by graduates in order for them to be considered work-ready, to a wider notion encompassing non-technical areas such as networking (Bridgestock, 2017) and professional identity (Zegwaard, Campbell, & Pretti, 2017). Both these conceptualizations focus on an individual's 'potential' to acquire desired employment (through the development of appropriate human capital), which differs from 'realized employability' - the actual acquisition of desired employment (Wilton, 2014, p. 246).

Recent calls for more critical approaches to understanding employability (e.g., Burke et al., 2016), including broader conceptions of the term (e.g., Clarke, 2017), have led to views moving beyond the skills based approach to a wider conceptualization that better captures "the complexity of graduate work-readiness" (Jackson, 2015, p. 925). Some have advocated that the term 'profession-ready' may better capture the recent wider conceptualization and shift the discussion from 'work' to the 'profession' instead (Zegwaard et al., 2017). Advocates of the wider conceptualization approach argue that "employer-driven lists...do not address the full picture of what is required by the graduate facing the prospect of the labour market" (Bridgestock, 2009, p. 34). Namely, the shift from predictable, linear, and vertical progression pathways to horizontal organizational structures, global mobility, and rapidly changing work environments (McMahon, Patton, & Tatham, 2003), means that graduates need to be flexible and adaptive to manage uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability, rather than acquiring a fixed set of skills (e.g., Barnett, 2012; Helyer & Lee, 2014). Emerging perspectives of employability reflect this change and are inclusive of a diverse range of areas including career self-management, professional identity, transfer of capabilities across contexts, students perceived employability (and their ability to articulate it), networking, global citizenship, and scholarship among other notions (e.g., Bridgestock, 2009; Jackson 2015; Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Wilton, 2014).

The impact of WIL on employability capability development emerges as a dominant theme within the literature, supporting recent developments in the evaluation of WIL initiatives and programmes. The experience of WIL alone, however, does not guarantee employability outcomes for

students and graduates. In order to be truly effective, such experiences should be embedded in curriculum and supported by pedagogical strategies throughout a program to maximize learning opportunities (Bates & Hayes, 2017). Finally, the quality of student learning, including development of employability capabilities, needs to be assessed. However, assessment of employability skills development is a complex endeavour requiring assessments to be framed carefully around notions of proximity and authenticity (Kaider, Hains-Wesson, & Young, 2017), and one which has resourcing implications for higher education institutions.

## 5. Promoting employability through curriculum design

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting WIL as a useful strategy for promoting employability, the WIL experience alone is not a guarantee of success. As Clarke (2017) and others have noted if it is to be effective then WIL activities must be meaningful, relevant, and intentionally integrated and aligned with university curriculum (Johnston, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Sachs et al., 2017). Indeed, recent scholarship suggests the relationship between WIL and improved employability may be less direct than once thought. Oliver (2015, p. 63), for example, conceptualizes WIL as a “means to an end (employability) rather than an end in itself.” Clarke (2017) similarly contends that employability promotes a higher level of self exploration, guidance seeking and other associated proactive career behaviours which in turn may improve employability, rather than impacting directly on employability per se (e.g., guaranteeing career success). Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) found that the process of engaging in career self-management developed employability through the promotion of self-exploration, guidance seeking, and other associated proactive career behaviours. Another consideration is the role of WIL stakeholders in improving employability – much existing scholarship emphasizes the role and responsibility of HEIs, but there are other stakeholders such as industry, community partners, government, and employers, whose input into curriculum is vital to ensure it remains relevant to the needs of employment markets (Tran, 2015).

Employability capabilities can to some extent be fostered through “add-on” activities that sit outside of formal academic programs (e.g., co-curricular WIL), or more effectively using holistic approaches which embed employability within academic curriculum. There has been a move towards favouring the latter recent years (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016; Helyer & Lee, 2014). For example, Billett’s work (2015) established that effective pedagogical interventions before, during, and after a WIL activity (including reflective practice, debriefing, and assessment) are key to maximizing students’ learning from the experience. Further, including WIL early on in a student’s program of study and sequencing experiences throughout their study is thought to be particularly beneficial for assisting students to determine what study specialization they prefer and/or are best suited to (Billett, 2015). Despite such developments, Speight, Lackovic, and Cooker (2013) observe that “tensions over the relationship of employability to the academic curriculum” (p. 123) remain, and “employability as bolt-on serves those who need it least.

Employability as ‘hidden’ within the curriculum serves no one as it cannot be articulated” (p. 124). There clearly is no one size fits all approach, and not surprisingly various models of developing employability are proposed in the literature. As Knight and Yorke (2004, p. 2) note, “the complexity of employability and the variety that exists in curricula...mean that no single, ideal, prescription for the embedding of employability can be provided.” Reconceptualizing employability as capability, that is, “the combination of skills, knowledge, and personal qualities that engender flexibility and adaptability” (Speight et al., 2013, p. 123) may offer a middle ground. In light of what has just been said one can make a case study for how employability can be embedded throughout a university degree program, drawing attention to the importance of scaffolding employability before, during, and after a student’s time at university in order to build their awareness of career options from an early stage.

## 6. Conclusion

Although employability seems to receive considerable attention and scholarly debate in the literature, there are still notable gaps around evidence that links successful attainment of work-ready skills to the impact graduate employability and employment, including the long- term career implications. There are few available longitudinal studies exploring employability. Furthermore, there is a need to consider curriculum redesign with employability foundational to the curriculum, where students can identify and explicitly link to their learning activity to a desirable graduate competency. Advancing the education provided to post-secondary students is integral to effectively preparing them for a life-long career in their chosen field. Therefore, it is likely that employability, despite the considerable discussion already in the literature, will remain a key research direction and focus of scholarly debate for some time yet.

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